




# Do Victims and Perpetrators Justify Intimate Partner Violence Even While They See It Happening in Front of Their Eyes?

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## Abstract

When intimate partner violence occurs, both victims and perpetrators may justify the violence. However, efforts to understand justifying violence typically rely on written descriptions of violent acts or are assessed well after the violence has occurred. Do victims and perpetrators justify violence even while they see it happening? A novel paradigm addressed this question in two cross-sectional studies (Study 1,  $N = 535$  and Study 2,  $N = 480$ ). Using this paradigm, participants in the violent and non-violent relationships gave in-the-moment and continuous justification ratings (using a slider) as they watched video clip(s), each depicting a couple having a heated and violent fight. The results showed that participants who previously had experienced victimization or perpetration were more likely to justify the violence, both during and after watching the violent clips. This research provides new insights into the nature of violence justification and offers a novel paradigm for future studies.

## Keywords

Intimate partner violence, justification of violence, romantic relationships, partner aggression, partner violence

Aggression and violence in romantic relationships, referred to as *intimate partner violence* (IPV), can become more frequent and severe over the course of a violent relationship (Follingstad et al., 1992; Walker, 2017). While there are factors that are associated with the persistence of violence (e.g., Henning et al., 2009; Kingsnorth, 2006), an important socio-cognitive mechanism explaining why violence may be maintained is the tendency to justify the violence (Arriaga et al., 2018; Calvete, 2008; Calvete et al., 2018; Capaldi et al., 2012; Fernández-González et al., 2017). As a way to cope with psychological conflict and to maintain a positive self-image (e.g., Arriaga et al., 2016; Marzana et al., 2016; Ward, 2000), when violence occurs, both victims and perpetrators may condone what happened by downplaying, reinterpreting, and justifying the violence (Arriaga et al., 2018; Schumacher et al., 2001; Stith et al., 2004). This may have important downstream consequences. For example, victims who justify violence are more likely to forgive and have a stronger intention to remain in the relationship and return to the perpetrating partner (Gilbert & Gordon, 2017), and when perpetrators engage in justification of violence, they are less likely to seek help (Cadsky et al., 1996).

Several studies have found a significant positive association between victimization and perpetration on one hand and the justification of violence on the other hand (e.g.,

Ruddle et al., 2017; Schumacher et al., 2001; Stith et al., 2004, but see Black et al., 2019; Spencer et al., 2017). However, the justification of violence is usually measured *after* the violence has occurred and using written descriptions of a violent act, which has several methodological limitations as we will explain in more detail below. This also raises an important conceptual issue: Do victims and perpetrators engage in justification of violence even *while* they see it happening? Using a novel paradigm in which participants are watching video scenes of IPV, the present research addresses this research question.

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## Measuring the Justification of Violence

The justification of violence is generally measured by presenting people with written descriptions of violent behaviors and assessing their evaluations and interpretations of that behavior (e.g., Calvete, 2008; Huesmann & Guerra, 1997; Schuster et al., 2021). For example, researchers have asked participants to indicate the extent to which they could still justify certain violent behaviors, such as hitting a partner or shouting at a partner (e.g., Shen et al., 2012). Others have asked participants to indicate the extent to which they interpret violent acts as “joking behavior” (e.g., Arriaga, 2002), or have simply asked which specific acts, ranging from shouting at a partner to beating up a partner, would be grounds for ending a relationship (Arriaga et al., 2016). Generally, to the extent that people have encountered violence in a relationship more frequently or more strongly, either as victim or perpetrator, their responses to these types of measures suggest justification of violence (e.g., Neighbors et al., 2013; Reyes et al., 2015; Spencer et al., 2017).

There are, however, several potential conceptual and methodological limitations to operationalizing justification of violence in this manner that may bias previous findings and conclusions. First, when responding to written items that describe acts of violence, such as “hitting” or “insulting,” people may have idiosyncratic interpretations and different mental representations of what these acts actually entail. When evaluating whether “hitting” is acceptable in a relationship, two individuals may have very different scenes in mind: One person may imagine a mild hit on the shoulder, the other a slam in the face. While such individual differences are interesting in and of itself, and may depend on the person’s own experience with relationship violence, they cannot be properly studied with commonly used measures of justification. Thus, when studying the justification of violence, it is not clear whether different participants actually respond to objectively the same violent acts, which makes it difficult to interpret what behavior people are justifying exactly.

Second, presenting violent behaviors as written descriptions arguably results in responses based on a relatively “cold” cognitive process (Kerr & Zelazo, 2004; Zelazo & Muller, 2002). Responding to written descriptions of violence and indicating whether it is justifiable, clearly is very different from being actually confronted with violence. Participants may be able to process the descriptions of violent behaviors in a somewhat distant non-emotional manner, giving a cognitive assessment of how justifiable or acceptable a certain violent act is. In contrast, *seeing* IPV occur, for example in a video scene, may evoke a more emotion-laden and “hot” assessment of the level of acceptability and justification. Indeed, such task differences—responding to written versus visual information—are likely to induce cold versus hot processes, respectively (Holmes & Mathews, 2005; Holmes et al., 2008; and involving

different brain processes, see Salehinejad et al., 2021 for a recent overview). While watching a video of violence is different from being confronted with violence in real life, due to the more emotion-laden hot processing of a video scene of IPV as compared with a written description, participants may provide a more gut-level response (cf. Pessoa & Ungerleider, 2004).

It is an empirical and theoretically interesting question whether victims and perpetrators (i.e., as compared with individuals in non-violent relationships) still show justification of violence even when they are visually confronted with scenes of IPV. On one hand, it is possible that actual scenes of violence rather than written descriptions trigger experiences that are closer to real life, and being in a “hot emotional state” may make it harder for victims and perpetrators to justify violence. On the other hand, being confronted with more realistic scenes of violence may more strongly trigger psychological defense mechanisms that usually underlie the justification of violence (e.g., being motivated to reduce internal conflict of maintaining a violent relationship, or maintaining a positive self-image; Arriaga, 2002; Arriaga et al., 2016; Nicholson & Lutz, 2017), thus resulting in even *stronger* justification of violence among victims and perpetrators. Another possibility is that people who have experienced violence either as victim or perpetrator to some extent may become “desensitized” to violence, altering their emotional and cognitive responses (cf. Funk et al., 2004, also Arriaga et al., 2016, Study 1). Although this explanation has received relatively little attention in previous literature on IPV (see Johnson et al., 2022 for a recent exception), people frequently exposed to violence may become desensitized, in that, they experience a relatively numb emotional reaction, and as a result, believe that the violence they see in a video is relatively acceptable. This possibly suggests that justification already operates at a very early stage of processing and interpreting violence. Examining such processes is not only interesting for theoretical reasons, but also relevant for designing interventions.

To answer our central research question and address the potential limitations of current measures, we developed a novel paradigm for measuring the justification of violence. In this paradigm, participants in violent and non-violent relationships are visually presented with video clips of a couple having a heated fight. This method provides an innovation in several ways. First, participants respond to the same objective scenes of violent behavior rather than relying on their own interpretations of written behaviors. Although video scenes of violent behavior still can be interpreted differently between individuals, and obviously differ from witnessing or experiencing violence in real life, videos provide much more contextual information that reduces ambiguity whereas written descriptions are more open to interpretation. Second, participants provide their reactions *while watching* the video, using a slider continuously to indicate the acceptability of behavior in violent scenes.

**Table 1.** Spearman's Correlation Analysis (Study 1)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	M	SD
1. Victimization	—					19.86	30.38
2. Perpetration	.90***	—				19.75	28.95
3. JoV-Video_Slider	.13*	.14**	—			28.77	13.37
4. JoV-Post_Video	.30***	.32***	.59***	—		38.95	16.05
5. JoV-General	.51***	.53***	.33***	.65***	—	37.25	10.24

SD = standard deviation.

Note. *n* for JoV-Video\_Slider correlations = 414; *n* for other variables = 535; JoV = Justification of Violence.

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

This provides a more faithful assessment of in-the-moment reactions to a violent interaction as it unfolds. Third, it stands to reason that watching a violent scene (instead of reading a description) results in stronger emotion-laden and “hot” rather than cold processing (Kerr & Zelazo, 2004; Zelazo & Muller, 2002), which comes closer to real-life responses to IPV.

## The Present Research

We conducted two online studies to test whether people who are victims or perpetrators justify violence in-the-moment *while watching* actual scenes of IPV. In both studies, participants currently in an ongoing romantic relationship first indicated the extent to which they had experienced violence in their relationship, both as victim and perpetrator (using the widely used conflict tactics scale; Straus et al., 1996), after which they watched scenes of IPV. We examined whether the justification of violence as measured in our novel paradigm is associated with a traditional measure of justification of violence, in which participants indicate the acceptability of written descriptions of violent behaviors. We explored whether in-the-moment assessments of visual scenes of violence would be associated with either stronger or weaker justification of violence, as compared with written descriptions of violence.

Study 1 used an online platform (i.e., Prolific) to recruit a nationally diverse sample of participants. In Study 2, we specifically focused on recruiting participants from Indonesia. Indonesia has a particularly high number of reports of gender-based IPV cases. More than 300,000 cases were reported to local authorities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in 2021 (Komnas Perempuan, 2022). When violence is highly prevalent in a country, IPV may be viewed as more “normal” and therefore easier to justify. Hence, studying this topic is important in a country like Indonesia to further understand the role of justification of violence in victimization and perpetration. More broadly, like in other domains in psychology, the justification of violence has been studied mostly in Western samples (i.e., “W.E.I.R.D” samples; see Rad et al., 2018), restricting the generalizability of the findings.

## Methods

Both studies were pre-registered on the Open Science Framework (OSF; [1](#) and [2](#)). All procedures and materials were reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee Social Sciences of Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands (#ECSW-2021-106). Materials, data, scripts, and a Supplementary File are also available on OSF (<https://osf.io/hc8gt>). The sample size required for this study estimated with power analysis is 101 for each group, effect size  $f^2 = .0989$  (Stith et al., 2004),  $\alpha = .05$ , power  $(1-\beta) = .80$ .

## Participants

**Study 1.** A total of 589 participants were recruited for the first screening phase of Study 1 via Prolific, an online platform that helps researchers recruit participants from all over the world. Inclusion criteria were that participants had to be at least 18 years old and currently in an ongoing relationship (unmarried or married) for at least 1 year. After the screening phase, data were collected from 535 participants (253 men, 273 women, and nine other genders) from 44 countries, mostly from the United Kingdom (17.57%), Portugal (16.82%), South Africa (11.4%), and Poland (11.4%) (see Table 1 in Supplementary File for the full list). The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 75 years old ( $M$  age = 30.46,  $SD$  age = 11.07). The average relationship length was 7.24 years ( $SD = 8.3$  years; range = 1–54 years), and 70% of participants were in an unmarried relationship. Most of the participants were bachelor-level graduate (46.9%), high school graduate (30.5%), and master-level graduate (19.4%).

**Study 2.** We recruited 1,288 participants via social media (Facebook and Instagram) for Study 2. We also used advertisement services from several Instagram accounts with more than 400,000 followers. The inclusion criteria were the same as in Study 1. After checking eligibility, 480 participants (102 men, 368 women, and 10 preferred not to say) completed the full questionnaire. Participants were from all five big islands in Indonesia, but mostly from West Java (22.1%), DKI Jakarta (17.5%), and East Java

(15.6%). Participants' age ranged from 18 to 50 years ( $M = 25.1$ ,  $SD = 5.3$ ) and 70.8% were in an unmarried relationship. Relationship length ranged from 1 to 20 years ( $M = 3.5$ ,  $SD = 3.04$ ). Most of the participants were bachelor-level graduate (49.7%), high school graduate (43.4%), and master-level graduate (5.2%).

### Procedure for Both Studies

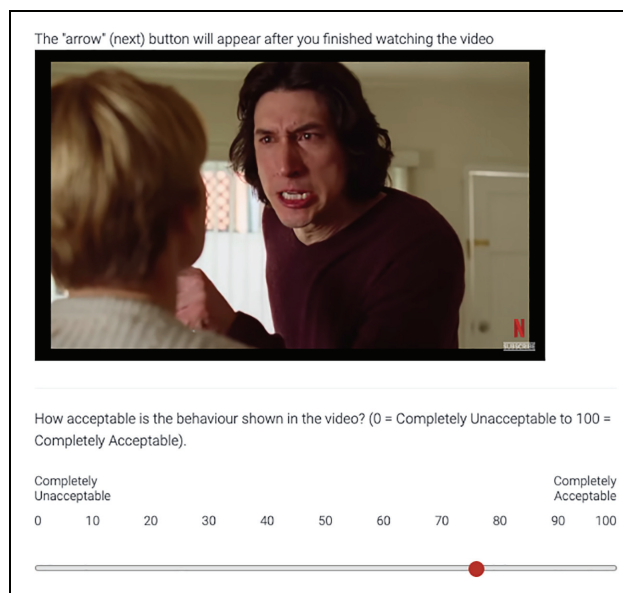
First, participants completed the 54-item *Conflict Tactic Scale-2* (CTS-2; Straus et al., 1996) to measure the level of victimization and perpetration. Next, participants completed the various justification of violence measures as described in detail below. In Study 1, there was 1 week in between the measurement of victimization/perpetration (i.e., CTS-2) and the justification of violence measures. In Study 2, participants completed all measures in one session<sup>1</sup>. At the end of the study, participants received a pamphlet describing IPV (definition, types, consequences, and patterns), and what to do if they experience it.

### Measures

**Level of Victimization and Perpetration.** Three subscales of the revised CTS-2 (Straus et al., 1996) were used to measure the experience of being a victim and/or a perpetrator: Psychological Aggression (e.g., "I threatened to hit or throw something at my partner"), Physical Assault (e.g., "I slapped my partner"), and Sexual Coercion (e.g., "I made my partner have sex without a condom"). The Negotiation subscale was not relevant to the current research, and the Injury subscale was excluded because low rates were expected in this population. Participants were asked to fill in "How often did this specific behavior happen in the past year?" (1 = once in the past year, 2 = twice in the past year, 3 = 3–5 times in the past year, 4 = 6–10 times in the past year, 5 = 11–20 times in the past year, 6 = more than 20 times in the past year, 7 = not in the past year, but it did happen before, to 0 = this never happened), followed by 27 items measuring victimization and 27 items measuring perpetration. We converted these scores to the midpoint of each range: 1, 2, 4, 8, 15, 25, 0, and 0, respectively (the "annual frequency" method; Straus, 2004). We translated CTS-2 ( $\alpha = .90$ ) into Indonesian using translate-back translate, expert judgment, and face validity processes.

**Justification of Violence.** In Study 1, participants were shown two short movie clips of violent interactions between partners of a couple. One movie clip was selected from the movie *Marriage Story* and the other from the movie *Revolutionary Road*. In Study 2, participants were shown a short movie clip from the Indonesian movie *Posesif*.

While watching each video clip, participants were instructed to provide continuous ratings throughout the video to indicate how acceptable the behavior that was



**Figure 1.** Still of JoV-Video\_Slider as It is Presented on the Screen

being shown in the moment, by moving a slider from 0 (*completely unacceptable*) to 100 (*completely acceptable*; see Figure 1). Ratings were obtained and stored every second of each video. The participants completely had the freedom to change their rating depending on what they saw and perceived in the scene. The every-second recording was programmed in the background. We used a JavaScript code to record it automatically. The first video (*Marriage Story*) was 259 seconds in length; the second video, *Revolutionary Road* was 137 seconds; the video that was used in the Indonesian sample, *Posesif*, was 153 seconds. Based on an a priori decision plan, we deleted the first 5 seconds of the videos during which participants calibrated their use of the slider, and the last part of the first video clip that depicts remorseful and apologetic behavior rather than violence. We averaged the scores across all time points for each video. In Study 1, we averaged the scores across the two videos, and in Study 2, averaged the scores across the single video, to create the first indicator of justification of violence (JoV-Video\_Slider).

We acknowledge that there are various ways to categorize participants into violent and non-violent groups. For example, Straus (2004) proposed a "prevalence method," categorizing participants as "violent" if they have experienced physical violence in the relationship at least once in the last year. They also proposed an "ever prevalence method," which categorized participants as "violent" if any violent acts were experienced at least once in their life or relationship. Hardesty et al. (2015) used a similar method, categorizing participants who scored 1 or more on physical and sexual violence.

First, in this research, we chose to categorize participants if they scored higher than 4 in the CTS-2, which is

based on the median score of Straus and Sweet (1992). Using this method, we categorized participants into violent groups if they had experienced at least three to five violent acts in the past year. This cutoff also ensures that participants in the violent group experienced more frequent or repeated violence in their relationship as compared with the non-violent group. As explained later (see Footnote 2), this method does not consider the least severe forms of violence in CTS-2, namely, shouting and swearing, as these behaviors were very common and do not appear to distinguish between violent and non-violent relationships.

Furthermore, for exploratory purposes, we also ran analyses using a categorization of participants while considering the severity level of violence. Participants who scored less than three violent acts, but who had experienced at least one act of severe violence (e.g., “I threatened to hit or throw something at my partner,” “I kicked my partner,” and “I used threats to make my partner have sex”; Straus et al., 1996) were categorized into the violent group. A detailed description of this alternative categorization and the comparably similar results can be found in Supplementary File.

Second, after watching each video clip, participants were presented with a list of violent behaviors that occurred during the clip (seven in the first clip, 11 in the second clip, and eight in the Indonesian clip; e.g., “Smash and kick a chair during an argument,” “Belittle partner”), and they were asked to rate how justifiable each of these behaviors in the video was to them (1 = never justifiable to 7 = always justifiable). Participants also responded to the item “In general, how justifiable are the behaviors shown in the video?” We averaged the responses to these items (Study 1,  $\alpha = .94$ ; Study 2,  $\alpha = .77$ ) to create a second indicator of justification of violence (JoV-Post\_Video). This measure is more in line with traditional measures of justification of violence, except that participants rate the same objective scenes rather than relying on their own mental representations of a written list of aggressive acts.

Third, in line with traditional measures of justification of violence, before watching the videos participants were presented with the same 27 violent behaviors that were used in the CTS-2 scale. For each of these behaviors, participants were asked to rate how justifiable each of these behaviors is in general (e.g., “Threaten to hit or throw something at partner,” “Slap partner,” “Make partner have sex without condom”; 1 = never justifiable to 7 = always justifiable). We averaged the scores across the 27 items (Study 1,  $\alpha = .86$ ; Study 2,  $\alpha = .89$ ), with higher scores representing higher levels of justification of violence. This was the third indicator of justification of violence (JoV-General).

**Other measures.** We also measured forgiveness, perceived forgiveness (Maio et al., 2008), commitment, satisfaction, investment, quality of alternatives (Investment Model

Scale; Rusbult et al., 1998), and dependence (Tan et al., 2018) for other research purposes.

### Data Preparation and Analysis

Before analyzing the data, we filtered and checked the participants’ JoV-Video\_Slider data for technical difficulties or problems. We dropped participants who did not have any (or very little) variance in the data; these are participants who did not move the slider for the whole video, participants who only moved the slider at the end of the video, and participants who had only three ratings or less. Based on these criteria, in Study 1, we excluded 103 (19.25%) participants for Video 1 and 92 (17.2%) participants for Video 2 for the analyses that include the video slider data. In both phases, we used attention checks in our questionnaires. In total, we dropped six (1.1%) participants who missed attention checks in data collection. This decision followed the Prolific regulation of exclusion of participants based on attention checks. The measure of violence victimization and/or perpetration yielded missing data for one item of one participant; we filled in as “0,” as one of the methods that Straus (2004) suggested.

In Study 2, we recruited 1,288 Indonesian participants, but 603 were dropped because they missed more than two attention checks. We also dropped 205 participants who did not fully complete the questionnaire. Hence, we had 480 participants in the final sample. As in Study 1, we dropped 229 (47.7%) participants’ video data because the data had less than four variances of score points. Of 480 participants, the video data of 251 participants were used for the analysis.

We expected a non-normal distribution in our data because people generally do not experience severe violence in their relationships nor condone or justify violence. Thus, we analyzed the data obtained using non-parametric statistical analyses in R Statistical Software (v4.0.2; R Core Team, 2020). We used Spearman’s rank-order correlational analyses to test the associations between the justification of violence, victimization, and perpetration.

## Results

### Study 1

**Correlational Analyses.** All three indicators of justification of violence (i.e., the traditional and novel measures) were significantly correlated, indicating good convergent validity of the novel measure with traditional measures. Moreover, both the level of victimization and the level of perpetration were associated positively with each justification of violence measure (Table 1). Notably, however, the correlations were smaller with the novel measure (JoV-Video Slider).

**Violent Versus Non-Violent Group and Justification of Violence<sup>2</sup>.** As can be seen from Table 1, the level of victimization and the

**Table 2.** Group Comparison Analyses (Study 1)

Dependent variable	Mdn violent	Mdn non-violent	W	p	95% CI	$\tau_b$
JoV-Video_Slider	30.11	24.95	13,943	.014	[-6.16, -0.73]	.105
JoV-Video_Slider 1	27.34	22.99	15,370	.019	[-7.37, -0.63]	.098
JoV-Video_Slider 2	28.54	26.92	16,994	.083	[-4.65, 0.29]	.072
JoV-Post_Video	39.00	32.00	19,944	< .001	[-7.99, -3.99]	.201
JoV-General	39.00	32.00	13,154	< .001	[-7.99, -5.00]	.380

CI = confidence interval.

Note. JoV = Justification of Violence;  $\tau_b$  = Kendall's tau-b.

level of perpetration were very highly correlated,  $r_s(533) = .90$ ,  $p < .001$ , indicating that if participants were perpetrators, they were highly likely to be victims at the same time, and vice versa. This finding is consistent with several previous findings (Allen et al., 2009; Straus & Sweet, 1992). Put differently, it seems that participants were either in a relationship where aggression or violence occurred (i.e., a *violent relationship*), in which they were often both victim and perpetrator, or in a relationship where aggression and violence did not occur (i.e., a *non-violent relationship*). Therefore, we ran additional analyses, in which we categorized participants as either being in a *violent* or in a *non-violent* relationship, and compared these two groups on our justification of violence measures. It is important to note that our studies may only represent situational couple violence and could not be generalized to other types of relational violence. Due to the recruitment method, our samples captured situational couple violence much more than severe coercive-controlling violence, intimate terrorism, or violent resistance couples (Johnson, 2006).

To categorize participants, we used the median level of violent incidents as found by Straus and Sweet (1992), which is four violent incidents per year. Participants who scored lower than four on the CTS-2 both as victim and as perpetrator were categorized as the "Non-Violent" group ( $n = 234$ ). In contrast, participants who scored four or higher in CTS-2 as both victim and perpetrator were categorized as the "Violent" group ( $n = 237$ ). As pre-registered, we aggregated the ratings across individuals for the comparison analyses (Tables 2 and 4) and used second-level aggregate ratings (average rating for each second) between participants to create the graphs (Figures 2 and 3). Second-level aggregate ratings were used to ensure the sensitivity of the rating toward participants' justification of violence in the video clips. Having data recorded every second helped us to better depict the fluctuation of the justification of violence during the video.

We conducted the Mann-Whitney  $U$  test to examine whether the groups differed on justification of violence, using all three measures of justification of violence as outcome measures. We used a significance level of alpha .05 for all statistical analyses. To accommodate the possibility of Type I error, Bonferroni corrections alpha was used, meaning that our alpha level for Mann-Whitney  $U$  test

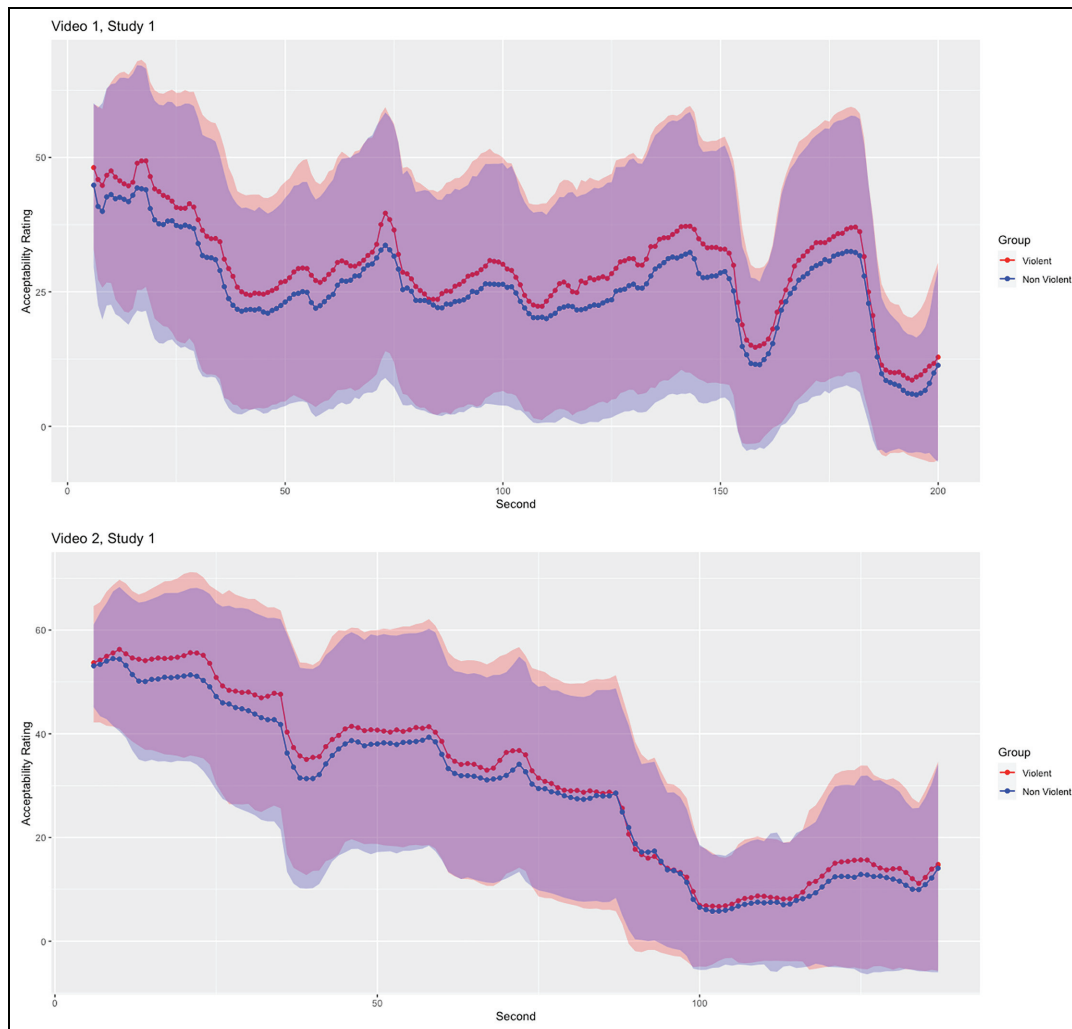
Study 1 was at .01 (.05/5). Results showed that participants in the violent group reported significantly higher levels of justification of violence compared with those in the non-violent group on the JoV-General measure and JoV-Post\_Video measure (see Table 2). We observed a difference between groups on JoV-Video\_Slider, although this difference did not reach statistical significance.

For presentation purposes, we depicted the continuous scores on the two videos across the whole timespan of both videos. As can be seen in Figure 2, and consistent with the correlational findings, it showed a clear pattern of higher acceptability ratings for participants in violent as compared with non-violent relationships, although this was more evident in the first video (i.e., Marriage Story) than the second (i.e., Revolutionary Road).

## Study 2

**Correlational Analyses.** Consistent with Study 1, in the Indonesian sample all three measures of justification of violence were positively correlated, again showing that the novel measure is moderately correlated with the traditional measures. Moreover, the level of both victimization and perpetration were positively associated with the justification of violence (see Table 3), both on the traditional measures (JoV-General and JoV-Post\_Video) and the novel measure (JoV-Video\_Slider). Similar to Study 1, the correlation with the novel measure was smaller compared with the traditional measures. Thus, as expected, participants who had experienced more frequent violent behavior in their relationship (as victims or perpetrators) were more likely to justify violent behavior.

**Violent Versus Non-Violent Group and Justification of Violence.** As in Study 1, we found that the level of victimization and perpetration were highly correlated,  $r_s(478) = .81$ ,  $p < .001$ . We categorized participants into two groups (i.e., *violent vs. non-violent relationships*) with the same procedure as Study 1<sup>3</sup>. Because the data were not normally distributed, we conducted a Mann-Whitney  $U$  test to examine whether the two groups differed on the level of justification of violence on all measures. We used Bonferroni corrections to



**Figure 2.** Group Comparison of JoV-Video\_Slider of Justification of Violence (Study 1 Videos)

Note. The red line depicts the mean responses of participants identified as being in a violent relationship, and the blue line depicts the mean responses of those identified as being in a non-violent relationship. The red shade shows the standard deviation ( $\pm 1$  SD) for the violent group, the blue shade shows the standard deviation for the non-violent group, and the purple shade shows the overlapping standard deviation of both groups.

account for multiple testing, which means our alpha level was .016 (.05/3) for Study 2.

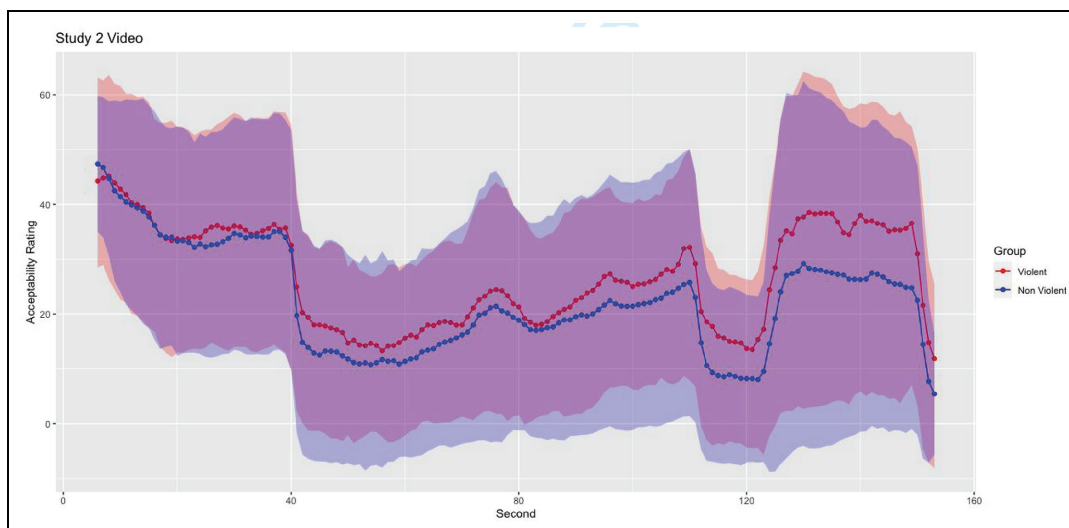
The violent group showed a significantly higher median compared with the non-violent group across three measures of the justification of violence (see Table 4). As shown in Figure 3, and consistent with Study 1, participants in the violent group rated the behaviors in the video as more acceptable than the non-violent group.

We also ran additional analyses to check whether there is a gender difference in all justification of violence measures across the studies. In most cases, we found no gender differences on most justification measures. However, there were two exceptions: on JoV-Video\_Slider and JoV-Video Slider 2 in Study 1 (see Tables H and J in Supplementary File), which showed men rated the video as more acceptable than women. Furthermore, to address the possibility of

“measurement error” in which the acceptability slider-ratings participants gave was about the entire clip rather than only about specific violent moments, we ran additional analyses of acceptability ratings during the isolated violent scenes used as reference points for post-video ratings. We found similar results between our previous analyses and these additional truncated violent-scene analyses. A description of the procedure and the results are in Supplementary File.

## General Discussion

The results of two studies showed that in-the-moment justification ratings of violent scenes were positively correlated with the traditional measures of justification of violence. Most importantly, we found that higher levels of victimization and



**Figure 3.** Group Comparison of JoV-Video\_Slider of Justification of Violence (Study 2 Video)

Note. The red line depicts the mean responses of participants identified as being in a violent relationship, and the blue line depicts the mean responses of those identified as being in a non-violent relationship. The red shade shows the standard deviation ( $\pm 1$  SD) for the violent group, the blue shade shows the standard deviation for the non-violent group, and the purple shade shows the overlapping standard deviation of both groups.

**Table 3.** Spearman's Correlation Analysis (Study 2)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	M	SD
1. Victimization	—					10.48	23.24
2. Perpetration	.81***	—				10.83	23.83
3. JoV-Video_Slider	.18**	.18**	—			24.28	13.12
4. JoV-Post_Video	.24***	.23***	.41***	—		11.61	3.93
5. JoV-General	.39***	.43***	.30***	.57***	—	32.66	8.89

SD = standard deviation.

Note. *n* for JoV-Video\_Slider correlations = 251; *n* for other variables = 480; JoV = Justification of Violence.

\*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

**Table 4.** Group Comparison Analyses (Study 2)

Dependent variable	Mdn violent	Mdn non-violent	W	<i>p</i>	95% CI	$\tau_b$
JoV-Video_Slider	27.93	20.49	3,435	.011	[-9.05, -1.24]	.147
JoV-Post_Video	11.00	10.00	13,592	<i>p</i> < .01	[-1.99, -5.03]	.197
JoV-General	34.00	28.00	9,550	<i>p</i> < .01	[-5.99, -3.00]	.353

CI = confidence interval.

Note. JoV = Justification of Violence;  $\tau_b$  = Kendall's tau-b.

perpetration were associated with more justification of violence, even when participants gave in-the-moment justification ratings while watching scenes of IPV. These results were found in diverse (including non-W.E.I.R.D.) samples, and across different video stimuli. Extending previous research, these results indicate that, even *while* they see it happening, people in violent as compared to non-violent relationships rate violence as more acceptable.

The current findings provide insights into the nature of the justification of violence. As suggested by responses to written descriptions as done in previous research, justification of violence can take place *after* the violence occurred. The current findings, based on in-the-moment acceptability ratings, indicate that justification processes even occur *while* being confronted with violence. Previously, justification of violence effects has been explained mainly in terms



of cognitive dissonance processes, such that, victims who depend on the relationships may try to justify and rationalize why they are staying in the relationship, and perpetrators try to rationalize the violence to maintain a positive self-image (e.g., Arriaga et al., 2016; Arriaga et al., 2018). The current findings revealed an additional explanation of the process underlying the justification of violence, namely that people who have experienced IPV themselves (either as victim or perpetrator) may become desensitized to violence (cf. Funk et al., 2004). Because they have been confronted with violence repeatedly, they simply become less sensitive to it and emotionally numb; therefore, they may have a lower threshold of what they consider acceptable when they watch IPV (see Arriaga et al., 2016, Study 1; see for similar recent reasoning, Johnson et al., 2022). This raises the important question of whether, in real life, victims and perpetrators already have a lower threshold of what they believe is acceptable the moment violence occurs, whether violence is downplayed and justified only after it occurred, or both (cf. Arriaga et al., 2016, Study 2). Insight into such processes is important as it can pinpoint the moment and extent of justification of IPV, which is important in developing intervention and treatment programs, which we discuss further below.

Interestingly, the association of victimization and perpetration levels and justification of violence using the in-the-moment video slider were generally weaker than the traditional measures using written descriptions. There may be at least two explanations for this. First, a straightforward methodological explanation may be a common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Compared with the novel in-the-moment video slider measure that involves physically moving a dial to reflect acceptability ratings, the traditional measures of justification of violence are more similar to the measures assessing the level of victimization/perpetration (i.e., in both cases responding on Likert-type scales to written descriptions of violence), possibly resulting in stronger correlations between variables. Second, as discussed in the introduction, responses to a video versus a written description of IPV likely are influenced by hot and cold cognitive processes, respectively. Hot processing is associated with brain regions involved in affective processing (e.g., ventromedial prefrontal cortex [VMPFC]; Goel & Dolan, 2003a), leading to responses that are more strongly based on personal biases and beliefs (Goel & Dolan, 2003b). The generally lower correlations of victimization and perpetration with the justification of violence when visually faced with concrete violent scenes may indicate that in a more “hot” emotion-laden state, victims and perpetrators may indeed find it more difficult to engage in rationalization processes and justify violence that they are observing in others, as compared with when they are in a “cold” and more detached state (i.e., when giving acceptability ratings toward written descriptions of violence), or as discussed, they are simply more desensitized to IPV.

The novel paradigm offers interesting opportunities for future research and application. For example, the present research paradigm is suitable for examining the physiological responses of victims and perpetrators (vs. non-victims and non-perpetrators) while being exposed to a violent scene. This would provide more theoretical insight into the nature of justification, as discussed above. Are victims and perpetrators experiencing indeed *less* physiological arousal when watching a violent scene, which would suggest a desensitization process? Or do they experience similar or even particularly high levels of arousal as compared with non-victims and non-perpetrators while watching violence, and would lower acceptability ratings result from a more “cold” rationalization process? Examining such research questions could also provide insights into the origins of psychosomatic problems among victims (e.g., Lown & Vega, 2001; Stöckl & Penhale, 2015), which may result from maladaptive coping strategies to cover negative stress responses to violence by justifying it.

There are many more questions that could be addressed using the current paradigm. While in the present research the videos mainly depicted two-sided IPV, in future research other videos can be used, depending on the specific research questions of interest. For example, what happens when victims and perpetrators provide their in-the-moment responses to one-sided violence? How does the gender of the perceiver and actors affect judgments? Or what happens to the perpetrators’ acceptability ratings when they are experimentally instructed to take either the perspective of the victim or the perpetrator? The paradigm offers an opportunity to address these and other theoretically interesting questions.

A potentially practical application of the paradigm is that it may be helpful in intervention contexts. Our findings suggest the need to revert maladaptive outcomes of desensitization. For example, having victims and perpetrators rate the acceptability of violent acts while watching it, and then showing their scores against the average acceptability scores of a general population (in non-violent relationships) may be a powerful way of giving victims and perpetrators insight into their justification processes. Increasing awareness may be an important prerequisite and helpful tool to intervene when victims and perpetrators engage in justification of violence, or when they have become desensitized (cf. Karremans et al., 2017; Smith & Donnelly, 2000).

Several limitations should be mentioned. First, we have argued that our findings are more likely to represent real-life responses to IPV, as video scenes of violence are expected to result in more emotion-laden and hot processing as compared with written descriptions. Of course, watching a video is not the same as experiencing or witnessing violence in real life. Thus, while we believe that the new paradigm represents an important advancement in terms of ecological validity in this research field, caution is warranted in generalizing to real life. Second, we recruited

participants from the general population and did not specifically recruit severe victims and perpetrators, who might have different cognitive processes when dealing with less severe forms of violence. As mentioned earlier, the violent group mainly represented situational couple violence, as indicated by the high correlations between victimization and perpetration. Thus, we should be careful in generalizing our findings to other types of violence, such as coercive-controlling violence, intimate terrorism, or violent resistance (see Anderson, 2009). Third, we used existing videos from movies that some people might be familiar with, affecting how they rated the scene. Fourth, we used CTS-2 to categorize participants. However, the CTS-2 has some limitations that have been debated previously, such as that it only measures a limited set of violent acts, that there is memory inaccuracy due to self-report, that it equates acts that differ in severity, and that it does not take into account the context of the violence (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998; Straus, 2017). Another limitation of the measure is that the cutoff point we used—like any cutoff point—is somewhat arbitrary. As we discussed above (and see Footnote 2, in which we used an alternative categorization approach, which did not alter the findings), there are other ways to categorize participants into violent versus non-violent groups. Finally, the studies were cross-sectional; thus, the results should not be interpreted as causal inferences. Moreover, an important avenue for future research is to use our paradigm to investigate more one-sided coercive-controlling violence and examine whether the justification of violence depends on the gender of the victim and the perpetrator as well as on the gender of the participant.

## Conclusion

The justification of violence is a process that plays an important role in the continuation of violence. The present results underscore how robust this tendency is among both victims and perpetrators: Even while they see violence occurring, they apparently regard it as less severe and more acceptable than people who have little or no experience with IPV. Hence, the present research provides novel insights into the robustness and nature of the justification of violence, and the novel paradigm offers a springboard to examine novel research questions on this important topic.

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## Supplemental Material

The supplemental material is available in the online version of the article.

## Notes

1. In Study 1, there were two phases of data collection via Prolific. The first phase aimed to screen participants and obtain the same number of participants across four groups (perpetrators, victims, both perpetrators and victims, and neither). It became untenable to obtain an equal number of participants for each group, and all participants were invited to do the second phase. The difficulty of recruiting equally sized groups is addressed in the “Results” section.
2. In this study, 53.8% of participants reported on the CTS-2 that insulting or swearing occurred in their relationship, and 71.8% of participants indicated that shouting or yelling occurred, either as a victim and/or perpetrator, in the past year. Apparently, these items measure behaviors that occur in many relationships and are therefore not particularly distinctive for violent relationships. Hence, we decided to exclude those two items in categorizing participants. At first, we planned to categorize participants into four groups: “Victims only,” “Perpetrators only,” “Both (Violent Group),” and “Neither (Non-Violent Group).” However, across the sample, we found low numbers of participants who were categorized as victims only ( $n = 38$ ) or perpetrators only ( $n = 26$ ). Hence, in the analyses, we focus on comparing participants who are in a non-violent ( $n = 234$ ) and violent relationship ( $n = 237$ ).
3. Across the sample, we found low numbers of participants who were categorized as victims only ( $n = 31$ ) or perpetrators only ( $n = 45$ ). Hence, in the analyses, we focus on comparing participants who are in a non-violent ( $n = 265$ ) and violent relationship ( $n = 139$ ).

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